Greeley, Horace
Letter to a politician

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Letter To A Politician
by
HORACE GREELEY

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LETTER

TO A

POLITICIAN.

(SAMUEL J. TILDEN.)

BY

HORACE GREELEY.

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LETTER TO A POLITICIAN.

To SAMUEL J. TILDEN, *Chairman Democratic State Committee.*

SIR:

You and I are growing old. We came here young men from the country, and have lived and struggled side by side for nearly 40 years. We have participated ardently in many political struggles, always on different sides. You were the pupil of VAN BUREN and SILAS WRIGHT; I a disciple and follower of HENRY CLAY. But this I will say for you, that I am confident you have never sought to enrich yourself by politics, or at the expense of the public—that whatever of wealth you may have acquired or enjoyed was earned in your profession as a lawyer—and that your instincts and your influences, partisanship apart, have generally been felt on the side of economy in public expenditure and uprightness in the conduct of public affairs. Of *my* course in these respects you are welcome to say whatever you think true.

On one very important point, however, your bitterness as a partisan has impelled you to ignore and come short of your duty as a citizen and a professed upholder of government by the People; and for this dereliction I here arraign you. I allude to the preservation of the purity of the Ballot-box.

You and I grew up in the country, and are familiar with elections as there conducted. We both know that, except in a few districts where the voters are all on one side, it is morally impossible that any considerable proportion of fraudulent votes should there be polled. For those who attend a poll are nearly all well known to each other, and hardly ever is one entitled to vote who is not known to be so to men of each party. If one should offer a vote who is not so known, he is challenged and questioned of course, and his answers will convict him if a bogus voter. I do not believe that the illegal vote in the rural districts was ever one per cent of the whole number polled, even when there was no registration of legal voters.

How different is the case in cities, and especially in this Babel, you very well know. Long as you have lived on Gramercy Park, and eminent in social position and fortune as are the inhabitants of that favored locality, you could not tell within twenty which of the residents in sight of your front door are and which are not entitled to vote; you

could not make a list of the legal voters residing on that square which would even approach accuracy. How it must be, then, with the nomadic denizens of our "back slums" and of our great tenement houses—how utterly impossible it is that any one should know which among them are and which are not legal voters, and whether the man who offers to vote at 11 a. m. at one poll has not already voted several times at different polls, and whether he is or is not on his way to vote still oftener at other polls, you cannot help knowing if you would. I can imagine how a man may shut his eyes to many things which he deems it convenient not to know, but I speak of what you *must* know, however you may wish or seek to be ignorant of it.

The matter to which I call your attention is vital to the very existence of free, popular government. Whenever it shall be generally understood that the results of the elections are not determined by the ballots of legal voters, but by frauds in voting or frauds in counting, then the advent of avowed, unequivocal despotism must be near at hand. Between the rule of an emperor and the rule of a clique of ballot-box stuffers, every intelligent man must prefer the former as less rapacious and more responsible. When honest citizens shall avoid the polls, asking, "What is the use of voting? the result is already fixed," the days of the Republic will be numbered. Between a ruler who prohibits

voting altogether and the gang who make it a sham by filling the ballot-boxes with illegal votes, or miscounting those actually cast, the sway of the former is every way preferable.

Mr. TILDEN, I have been voting here for 37 years, and an active politician for more than 30 of them, and I appeal to God for my sincerity and to my public record for a witness that in all those years I have earnestly sought and labored to have our elections decided by legal votes and none other. Seeing how great are the temptations and the facilities, under a Right of Suffrage so general as ours, to poll illegal votes, I have openly and actively favored every effort to shut them out and keep the suffrage pure and legal. That every legal voter should have a full and fair opportunity to vote once at each election—that no one should be enabled to vote more than once—and that none but legal voters should be allowed or empowered to vote at all—such has been my constant aim. I have not confined myself to barren professions, but have shown my faith by my works.

How is it with *you?* You hold a most responsible and influential position in the councils of a great party. You could *make* that party content itself with polling legal votes if you only would. In our late Constitutional Convention, I tried to erect some fresh barrier against election frauds; did *you?* The very little that I was enabled to effect in this direction

I shall try to have ratified by the People at our ensuing Election. Will *you?*

Mr. TILDEN, you cannot escape responsibility by saying, with the guilty Macbeth,

> Thou canst not say I did it; never shake
> Those gory locks at *me!*

for you were at least a passive accomplice in the giant frauds of last November. Your name was used, without public protest on your part, in in circulars sowed broadcast over the State, whereof the manifest intent was to "make assurance doubly sure" that the frauds here perpetrated should not be overborne by the honest vote of the rural districts. And you, not merely by silence but by positive assumption, have covered those frauds with the mantle of your respectability. On the principle that "the receiver is as bad as the thief," you are as deeply implicated in them to-day as though your name were TWEED, O'BRIEN, or OAKEY HALL.

Mr. TILDEN, you and I were ardent participants in the struggle of 1840, wherein MARTIN VAN BUREN was ousted from the Presidency by Gen. HARRISON. You know how thoroughly our city was absorbed in that contest, wherein every man, woman, and child took a deep and lively interest. Our elections were then held throughout three days; there was a registration freshly enacted which blacklegs had not yet learned to circumvent

the right of suffrage was as widely diffused as it now is, no one ever complained that a single legal voter was unable then to poll his vote. And, though our city has since largely increased its population, *the lower wards* were quite as populous then as they are to-day — several of them more so They were full of boarding-houses crowded with clerks and mechanics. Many of these covered sites since given up to great warehouses and manufactories; their denizens have moved up-town, over to Brooklyn, or out on some of the railroads that lead into the open country. Practically, the lower wards are being given up to commerce, and no longer shelter by night the multitudes who throng their streets by day.

Now look at the vote of four of these wards i 1840 and 1868 respectively:

	President, 1840.		Governor, 1868.	
Wards.	Harrison.	Van Buren.	Griswold.	Hoffman.
IV.....	1,138	1,177.....	480	3,830
VI.....	806	1,223.....	369	5,032
VII.....	1,707	1,728.....	1,265	6,895
XIV.....	1,142	1,393.....	726	4,526
Four Wards..	4,793	5,521.....	2,840	20,283

Van Buren's majority, 728; Hoffman's majority, 17,443

Mr. Tilden, you know what this contrast attests. Right well do you comprehend the means whereby the vote of 1868 was thus swelled out of

all proportions. There are not Twelve Thousand legal voters living in those Wards to-day, though they gave HOFFMAN 17,443 majority. Had the day been of average length, it would doubtless have been swelled to at least Twenty Thousand. There was nothing but time needed to make it One Hundred Thousand, if so many had been wanted and paid for.

Now, Mr. TILDEN, I call on *you* to put a stop to this business. You have but to walk into the Sheriff's, the Mayor's, and the Supervisor's offices in the City Hall Park, and say there must be no more of it — say it so there shall be no doubt that you *mean* it — and we shall have a tolerably fair election once more. Probably a good part of the Fifty Thousand supplied last fall with bogus Naturalization Certificates will offer to register and to vote — some of them pretending not to know that they are no more citizens of the United States than the King of Dahomey is — but very few will vote repeatedly unless paid for it; and we shall not be cheated more than Ten Thousand if you simply tell the boss-workmen that there must be no illegal Voting instigated and paid for.

Will you do it? Your reputation is at stake. The cowardly craft which

"would not play false,
And yet would wrongly win,"

will not avail. If we Republicans are swindled as we were swindled last Fall, you, and such as you, will be responsible to God and man for the outrage. Prosecutors, magistrates, municipal authorities, are all in the pool; we have nothing to hope from the ministers of justice, and the villains have no fear of the terrors of the law. I appeal to you, and anxiously await the result.

Yours,

HORACE GREELEY.

New York, October 20, 1869.

THE CIRCULAR.

ROOMS OF THE DEMOCRATIC STATE COMMITTEE,
October 27, 1868.

MY DEAR SIR:

Please at once to communicate with some reliable person, in three or four principal towns and in each city of your county, and request him (expenses duly arranged for this end) to telegraph to WILLIAM M. TWEED, Tammany Hall, at the minute of closing the polls, not waiting for the count, such person's estimate of the vote. Let the telegraph be as follows: "This town will show a Democratic gain [or loss] over last year of —[number];" or this one, if sufficiently certain: "This town will give a Republican [or Democratic] majority of ——." There is of course an important object to be attained by a simultaneous transmission at the hour of closing the polls, but not longer waiting. Opportunity can be taken of the usual half-hour lull in telegraphic communication over lines before actual results begin to be declared, and before the Associated Press absorbs the telegraph with returns and interfere with individual messages, and give orders to watch carefully the count.

Very truly yours,

SAMUEL J. TILDEN.

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